

Constructing Social Threat

Identity Frames and Opinion Dynamics in the Swiss Media Coverage of
Extremism (1994-2024)

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Research Aim

To analyze the “social construction of a social problem” (Benson and Saguy 2005) over time

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To analyze the “social construction of a social problem” (Benson and Saguy 2005) over time

...and more specifically: To analyze the evolution of boundary-making processes (Lamont and Molnár 2002) in the Swiss media discourse of extremism and political violence over three decades

—> The media sets limits on which definition of a problem prevails

Research question

How are extremism and political violence constructed as a problem of religious and cultural difference?

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How are extremism and terrorism constructed as a problem of religious and cultural difference?

- > long-run boundary work
- > crisis-driven frame dynamics
- > sentiment-frame interplay

Arguments

1. Stable religious and cultural identity repertoire
2. Crisis-induced boundary dynamics
 - Acute Brightening and Synchronization
 - Enduring Renegotiation
3. Negative sentiment amplification during peaks in religious and cultural identity frame salience

Definitions

Definition of extremism

- Broad understanding of extremism
- Keyword search
 - Extremism
 - and variations thereof (such as extremist)
 - includes left-wing, right-wing and religious extremism
 - Radicalisation
 - and variations thereof (such as radicalized)
 - Terrorism
 - and variations thereof (such as terrorist, terror)
 - Political violence
 - includes religious violence

Frames and Topics

- Frame

- A frame is an interpretive schema or discursive repertoire that media actors deploy to define problems, assign causality, make moral judgments, and propose solutions (Entman 1993; Benford & Snow 2000)

- Topic

- A topic is a probabilistic cluster of words inferred by a computational model that co-occur across documents. Each **topic** roughly maps onto an underlying theme (e.g. “burka debate” or “refugee crisis”). Topics are aggregated into higher-order **identity frame** categories for theory-driven analysis.

Motivation

Previous research

- So far research has extensively focused on the coverage of immigration (Erhard et al. 2022), showing that terrorist attacks sharpen the binary perception of “us” versus “them” (Jovic 2023; Czymara & Gorodzeisky 2024)
- The analysis of coverage of extremism and political violence has mainly focused on selected events (Dooremalen and Uitermark 2021; Jenkins 2019) or specific forms of extremism (Bicer 2022; Bail 2012)

Focus on Switzerland

- Switzerland has not witnessed any major terrorist attack

Yet,

- the country has had a vivid discussion on extremist and terrorist threats and invested heavily in counter-radicalization strategies
- Extremist groups have been active in Switzerland
- Switzerland has a rich and extensive media landscape
- Switzerland has a large immigrant population

Key Mechanisms

Symbolic boundaries

- Religious markers (religious rituals, symbols) & identity categories (migration status, national belonging) (Lamont & Molnár 2002; Alexander 2006) define symbolic boundaries
- “Bright” boundaries—e.g., headscarves, minarets—anchor inclusion/exclusion (Alba 2005; Brubaker 2013)
- 4 religious and cultural boundaries
 1. intra-/inter-religious boundary-making
 2. Contested religious symbols and practices
 3. Migration and otherness in Europe
 4. National identity & state foundations

Moral panics and synchronization

- Moral panics
 - specific events trigger heightened discourse about religious identities and perceived threats (Cohen 2011)
- Synchronization
 - media outlets, regardless of their political orientation, might simultaneously amplify similar concerns and sentiments (Adam et al. 2019)

Data & Methods

Data corpus

1. Swissdox

- provides access to most Swiss print and online news outlets
- collection through Swissdox API

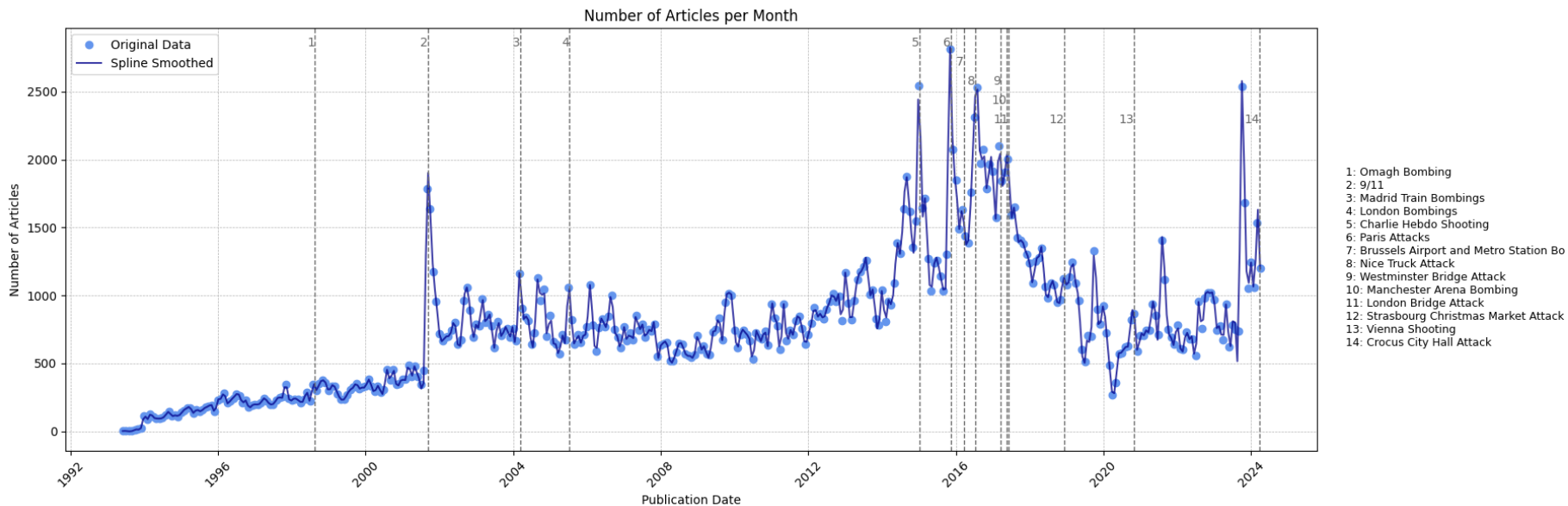
2. Criteria for inclusion

- high-quality media with a large circulation (in German language)
- print and online versions of the newspapers and magazines as well as news-sites
- broad political spectrum

3. Result

- 30 newspapers (print and online) across the political spectrum
- key words search yields to 286,660 valid articles (after pre-processing) between January 1994 and September 2024

Number of articles per month (1994-2024)



Topic Modelling and Sentiment Analysis

- Topic model

- BERTopic (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers), combines contextual understanding of language and applies semantic similarity between word vectors (Grootendorst 2022)
- requires a post hoc operations to connect model output to meaningful sociological concepts

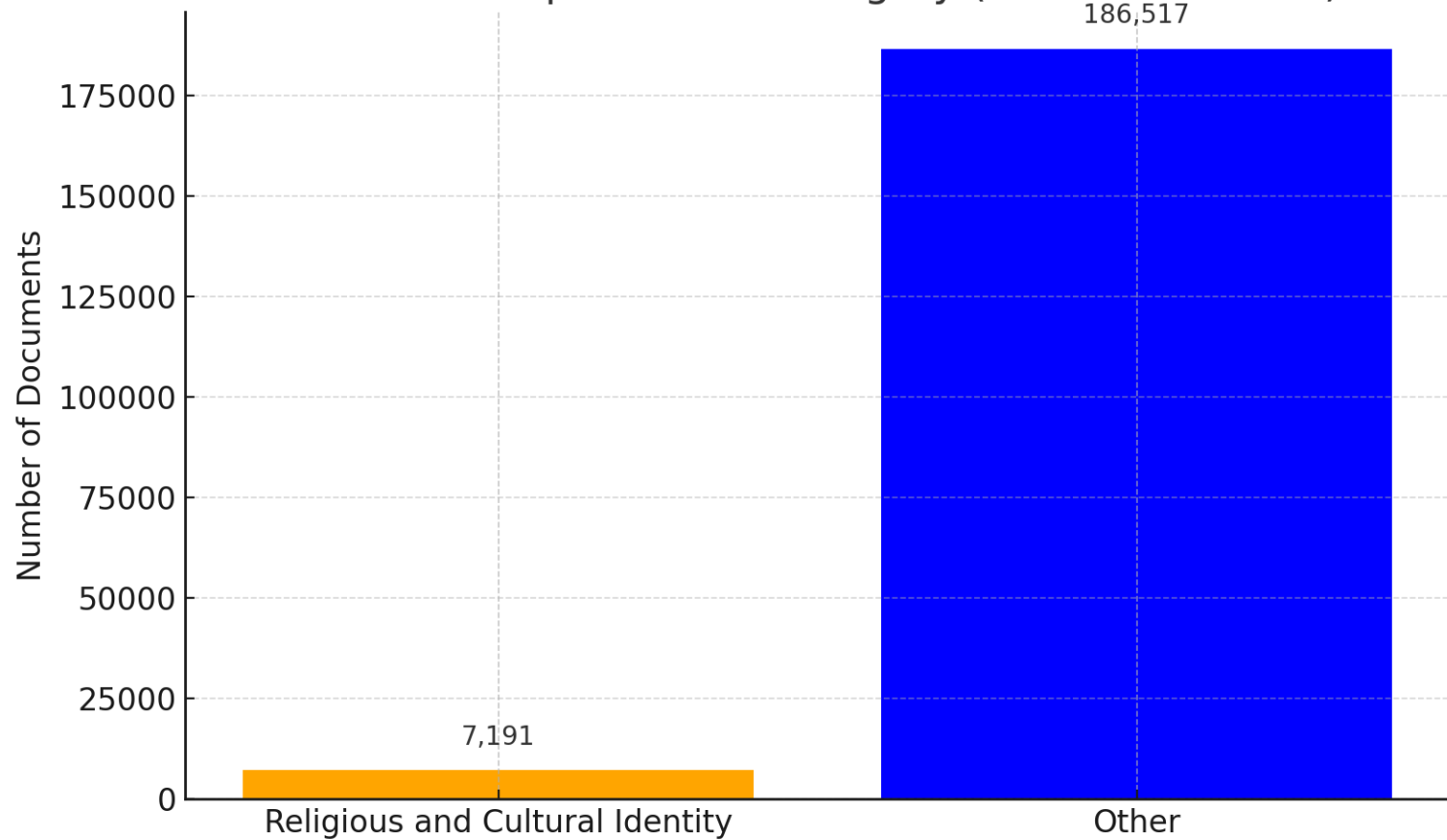
- Sentiment analysis

- Bert-base multilingual sentiment model determines the emotional tone behind a text
- human annotation of a random sample to validate the findings
- Comparison with lexicon of words models (SentiWS, GermanVADER)

Findings

Descriptives

Documents per Macro-Category (Without Outliers)



Religion and cultural identity

- **Intra-/inter-Religious Boundary-Making**
 - Catholicism;
 - Islam and Christianity
- **Contested religious symbols and practices**
 - Debate on wearing headscarf;
 - Burka initiative;
 - Minaret ban;
 - Islamic sermons

Centers on collective self-definition via faith traditions, symbols, and practices.

Religion and cultural identity

- **Intra-/Inter-Religious Boundary-Making;**
 - Islam and Christianity
 - koran, propheten, islams, religionen, islamismus, scharia, muslim, christentum, gottes
- **Contested religious symbols and practices**
 - Debate on wearing headscarf;
 - imam, imame, messahli, moschee, moscheen, muslimische, religionen, alimi, kopftuch, seelsorger

Migration and Otherness

- **Migration and otherness in Europe**
 - Refugee crisis;
 - Fears of Islamization (PEGIDA)

Frames certain groups as “insiders vs. outsiders,” defining belonging through mobility and difference.

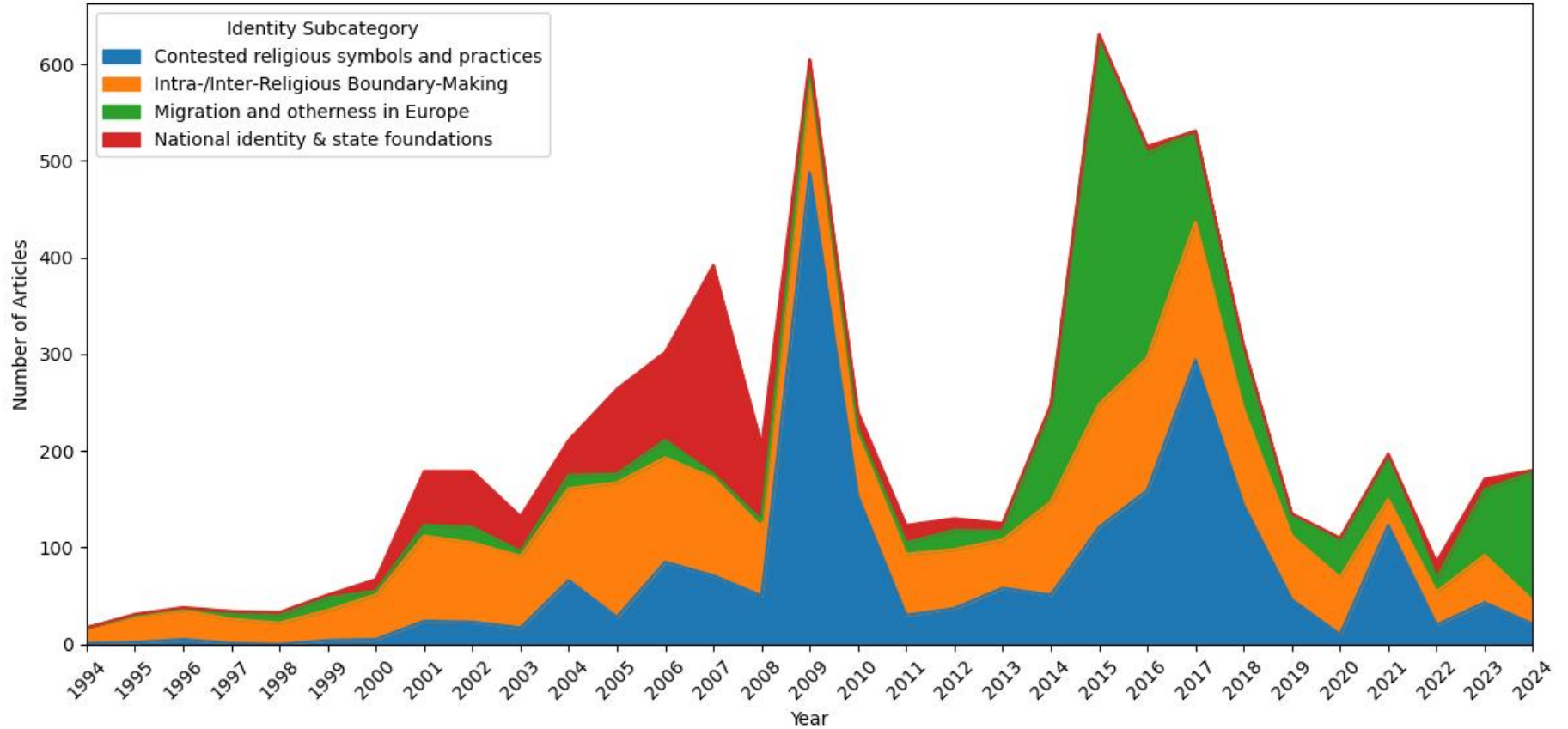
State and Nation

- **National identity & state foundations**

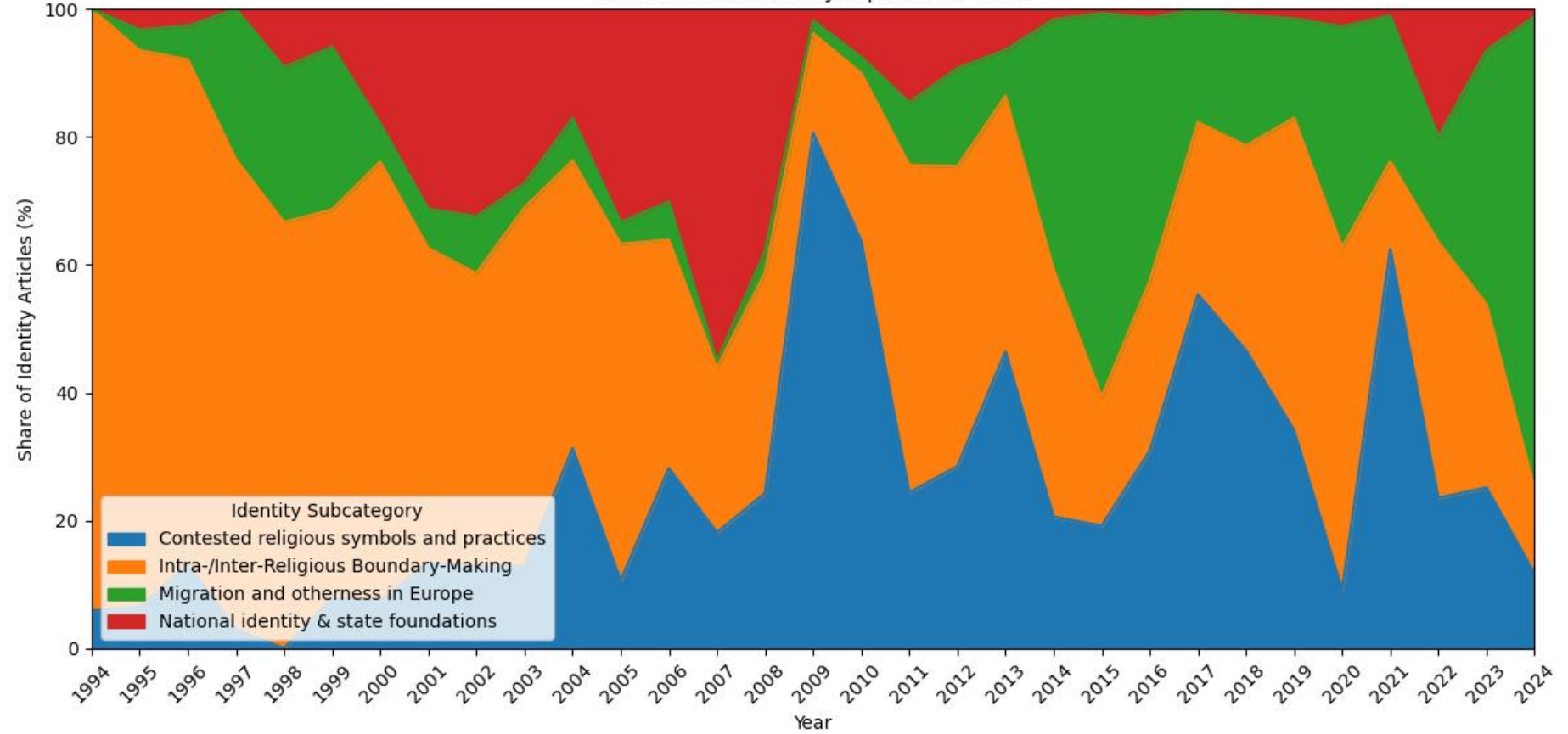
- Swiss National Day Celebrations and Foundational Identity;
- Swiss Neutrality and Foreign Policy Debates

Frames around neutrality myths and shared national self-image.

Absolute Counts of Identity Subcategories Over Time



Breakdown of Identity Topics Over Time



Ongoing: Temporal modeling of frame shifts

- Bayesian change-point detection
 - Pinpoints exact dates when framing patterns shift significantly
 - Validates change points against major terrorist attacks and policy referenda
- Interrupted Time Series (ITS)
 - Quantifies immediate level jumps/drops and slope changes in frame prevalence post-event
 - Distinguishes between short-lived spikes and enduring boundary renegotiation
- Analyses by political ideology of the newspapers

Conclusion and Outlook

Conclusions: topics

- Different types of religious and cultural Identity-related frames are represented in the media discourse on extremism and political violence
- The salience of religious boundary-making, contested symbols, migration, and national-identity frames changes over time
 - Identity frames seem to be sensitive to terrorist attacks and immigration-related policy initiatives

Limitations

- “We do not know what we do not know”
- Labelling and selection of topics is subjective
- Topic coherence versus number of outliers

Thank You!

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